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**De Vrije Katheder. Een platform van communisten en niet-communisten, 1945-1950.**

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In November 1940, after the occupation of the Netherlands by the German forces, the underground paper *De Vrije Katheder* was founded by a group of communist students at the University of Amsterdam. The students acted on their own initiative: there was no organisational link with the (then also) underground Communist Party. At a later date non-communists also participated in the resistance work of the *Vrije Katheder*-group. After the closing down in 1943 of the Dutch universities by the German occupational administration, *De Vrije Katheder* became a paper for the 'intelligentsia' in general and after the end of the war (May 1945) continued its existence as a weekly for intellectuals and artists. The *Vrije Katheder*-group was of the opinion that the weaknesses of the pre-war capitalist system and the shared experience of fighting fascism, highly favoured the co-operation of leftist groups, aiming at the transformation of Dutch society in a more socialist direction.

Both the communist and the non-communist editors of the paper were agreed that the Communist Party should play an important role in such a 'progressive front'. The Communist Party was expected to be much more acceptable to the general public than it had been in pre-war times, since it took part in the resistance movement against the Germans to such an extent that already during the war its following was appreciably increased. *De Vrije Katheder* could function as a platform on which the dialogue between communists and non-communists could continue and progressive political, cultural and economic ideas could be discussed, assessed and co-ordinated. On the international level it was thought that the co-operation between the allies would continue after the war. After the heroic fight of the Soviet Union against the German troops it had undoubtedly become an accepted and important member of the international community. However, the desire to reconstruct the Dutch political and economic system in a radical way appeared to be far less present among the Dutch people than was presumed. Pre-war institutions, political parties and personalities re-established themselves as soon as the war was over. And contrary to expectation anti-communism in the Netherlands had lost but little of its force. The conditions for the formation of a kind of 'popular front' appeared to be non-existent. The Social Democratic Labour Party (SDAP) fiercely rejected any idea of co-operation with the Communist Party, it shed the last of its marxist leanings and converted itself into the Partij van de Arbeid (Labour Party). After the first elections in May

1946 this party participated in a coalition-government with the conservative Katholieke Volkspartij (Catholic People's Party). The only party sympathetic to the ideas of the Vrije Katheder-group now appeared to be the CPN. The way relations developed on the international level was not conducive to the aims of *De Vrije Katheder* either. Instead of a continued co-operation between the Western powers and the Soviet Union the so called cold war started.

Keeping in mind this background of an unexpectedly and rapidly changing national and international environment, the present study analyses the articles written in *De Vrije Katheder* on the following subjects: 1. the post-war national political development; 2. the 'ideological' difficulties inherent in a 'progressive front'; 3. the relations between the 'intelligentsia' and socialism; 4. the arts and socialist society; 5. the postwar international development. By concentrating on the debates that took place on these subjects it was possible to discover differences of opinion between communists and non-communists. In addition the impact on the paper was traced of the substitution of war-time co-operation between communists and non-communists by post-war antagonism, both on the national and international level.

It is shown that in the first years after the liberation social-democrats and other liberals published and participated in the debates on the above mentioned subjects in *De Vrije Katheder*. Though most of them favoured a 'co-operation of progressive forces' for practical purposes, the ideological differences between social-democrats and communists were considerable. Social-democratic contributors however became fewer through the years due to growing anti-communism. This trend of diminishing participation was also shown in a loss of subscribers. Starting with a number of more than 7000 after the war *De Vrije Katheder* lost 4500 subscribers between autumn 1946 and autumn 1949. An analysis of the origins of the subscribers to *De Vrije Katheder* shows that half of them came from Amsterdam, where the Communist Party and the Labour Party in 1946 polled 32 and 31 % of the votes respectively, against nearly 11 and 28 % at the national level. The great majority of the Amsterdam subscribers were living in the well-to-do neighbourhoods of the town and in the artist and student quarters.

The editors of the paper were thus confronted with a continuing loss of subscribers and hence financial problems which forced them in May 1948 – after the communist take-over in Czechoslovakia – to change their weekly into a monthly. They were also hampered by an increasingly intolerant and dogmatic Communist Party. After 1947, the year in which the proclamation of the Truman-doctrine, the Marshall-plan and the founding of the Kominform finally divided the world into two antagonistic 'camps', there was a growing pressure exerted by the party on communist editors to change the policy of the paper so as to make it conform to the party-line. The party was especially irritated by the fact that phenomena such as the Prague coup, the cultural policy in the Soviet Union and the ideas of Lysenko were – however carefully – criticized by both non-communists and communist editors. Also that the paper conspicuously abstained from commenting on such questions as 'Titoism' and the political trials in Hungary, instead to toe the party-line on these subjects. Especially unacceptable to the party was the fact that *De Vrije Katheder* did not give adequate support to the World Peace Movement which held its first international congress in Paris in April 1949. All this was shown by an article

in the party-daily *De Waarheid* in December 1949 in which the editing policy of *De Vrije Katheder* was violently attacked.

The international situation created differences of opinion within the board of editors as well. Both communist and non-communist editors rejected the Western cold war ideology. In their opinion it was impossible to consider the Soviet Union, devastated as it was by the war and fully occupied with the reconstruction of their country, as a threat to the Western world. But where the communist editors, pressed by the party, tended to accept as imperative an unconditional choice in favour of the Soviet Union against the United States, the non-communist editors refused to consider such a choice as the only one conducive to peace. It would mean accepting the idea that no accommodation between the great powers was possible any more and that an arms race was the only remaining alternative.

Things came to a head when an article, written by a non-communist, appeared in *De Vrije Katheder* (December 1949) heavily criticizing the Western press for its one-sided reporting on internal conditions in the Soviet Union, but also containing a sentence ridiculing the adulation of Stalin (who celebrated his 70th birthday) in the Dutch communist press. The Communist Party considered this as an intolerable insult and as an example of 'disguised ideological preparation for war'. As it was clear that a continuation of the paper would mean the expulsion of the communist editors from the party, its publication was temporarily suspended. In the following months an agreement with the Communist Party, acceptable to both communists and non-communists could not be reached. The great majority of the editors therefore agreed to stop the paper. The other alternatives were to change *De Vrije Katheder* into either a radical-leftist non-communist paper or a communist party-organ. For the non-communist editors and the majority of the communist editors these alternatives meant a violation of the principle that the paper was a platform for a dialogue between communists and non-communists and were thus unacceptable. Five years after the liberation, in May 1950, the last issue of *De Vrije Katheder* appeared. Under the conditions of a cold war, in which both sides emphasized the inescapable need to make a choice between communism and anti-communism, there was no longer a place for a paper that meant to bridge the gap between communists and progressive non-communists.

In the present study biographies of the editors of *De Vrije Katheder* are included.

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